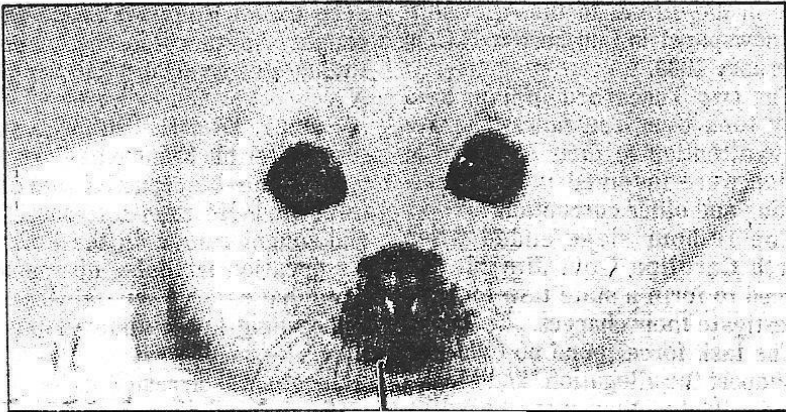


THE NEW BABY SEAL BUSINESS



Seals may be worth more alive than dead

By DAVID JOHNSTON
of The Gazette

CAP-AUX-MEULES — She weighed 400 kg. He weighed only 75. Despite the weight disadvantage, Léonard Chevrier charged at the grey-coated harp seal mother and kicked snow in her face.

The mother retreated 20 metres, abandoning her white-coated pup. Chevrier bent down and picked it up.

When he used to hunt baby harp seals commercially, this is how Chevrier would separate a pup from its mother. He'd break the pup's skull with a bat and sever the blood vessels under each flipper. Then he'd skin it within 90 seconds. The mother would dive through a hole in the ice to save her own life.

But last Saturday morning Chevrier wasn't hunting when he scared off the mother on a Gulf of St. Lawrence ice floe 25 kilometres offshore from Quebec's Magdalen Islands.

And he didn't have a bat in his hands.

He was acting as a guide for five seal-watching tourists who had landed on the ice in a helicopter 15 minutes earlier.

Chevrier is one of many of the 15,000 inhabitants of the Magdalen Islands who have been able to capitalize on the harp seal pups despite the federal government's 1987 ban on commercial hunting.

The islanders have turned a negative into a positive; they've started a winter seal-watching industry for tourists. And they've been so successful that by next year the baby harp seals might be worth more alive than dead.

Traditionally, the first three weeks of March was the season Canadian seaters hunted harp pups. But this activity, denounced worldwide by environ-

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mentalist as cruel, declined dramatically in 1983 when the European Community banned the import of harp pelts.

The federal ban followed European threats of sanctions against Canadian fish imports.

Said Chevrier, 30, an itinerant worker who now earns \$100 a day as a guide, or exactly what he once earned as a sealer during a good season: "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em"

But accommodating the growing number of tourists who want pictures of themselves beside harp pups is proving more dangerous to Chevrier than the seal hunt ever was.

After retreating from Chevrier, the 400-kg seal mother attacked him. Suddenly, the unarmed former hunter had become the hunted.

Skin grazed

Propelling herself forward on the ice with her two flippers, the mother barked in a high-pitched voice and snapped at Chevrier's right knee.

Trying to scramble backwards, Chevrier slipped on the ice.

The mother glared down at him. She had him down for the kill.

Instead, she just shrieked, retreated to her pup and went about her own business.

As it turned out, her teeth had cut through Chevrier's orange one-piece suit and corduroy pants inside. But they only grazed his skin.

"I was lucky. Those teeth cut through lobster shells like nothing," said Chevrier, a native of the Magdalen Islands who killed his first seal when he was 14.

"At least when I hunted I had a stick. But they (the hotel that has hired him as a guide) say a stick looks bad in front of the tourists."

Despite the federal government's ban on the commercial hunting of harp pups, Canadian sealers are still allowed to kill these infants so long as their meat and fur are for personal use.

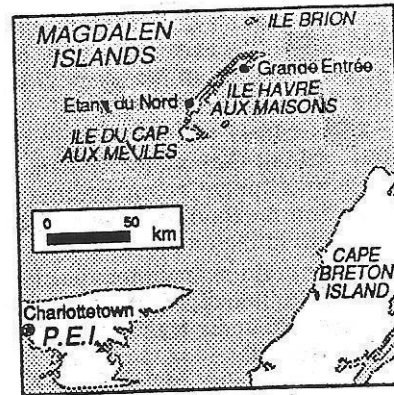
As a result, Chevrier now only hunts on days when bad weather grounds the tour helicopters.

"His whole argument is he'd rather get paid to see seals, but if he can't, he's got to make a living," said Susan Bickel, a tourist from Pittsburgh, Pa. "I can't fault that."

Making return visit

Shortly after the 1983 EC ban, the Magdalen Islands tourist association formed working relationships with three travel wholesalers and tracked down people who had donated money in support of harp pups. The association invited these people to take the next logical step: to visit the seals they had "saved."

And that's exactly what they've been doing.



IDEAL LOCATION
Seals stay close to shore

Last March, 200 tourists visited. This season, the number has grown to 500, including several who are back for a return visit.

Next year should bring another increase. One of the three travel wholesalers, Promotional Tours of Boston, expects to bring at least 700 people alone next March.

As the 500 people who have booked four-day packages this month are spending an average \$500 each in the local economy, seal tourism is now worth \$250,000 to the Magdalen Islands, half of the \$500,000 the hunt was once worth.

Of course, the money now goes into different pockets. Hotels, bars and restaurants benefit the most. But for many women — particularly chambermaids, barmaids and waitresses — the hunting ban has resulted in unprecedented winter income.